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**A Foucaultian Discourse Analysis of Educational ‘Underachievement’:
Psychology’s Run Away Concept**

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Abstract

Underachievement is a dominant feature in educational discourse; it is often framed as a 'crisis' affecting different social groups, or even whole countries. A particularly common depiction of underachievement is that of a 'gap' affecting ethnic minority and working class groups. Nearly 60 years of research, reform and policy attempts to address this 'gap' have made little progress in lifting achievement levels. This paper uses a Foucaultian discourse analysis method to encourage a reformulation of underachievement discourse, particularly as it relates to minority ethnic students. A genealogy of the conditions of possibility which gave rise to underachievement reveals this concept and its related assumptions and processes (such as testing) to be part of a broader system of power relations which structure education in favour of dominant cultural and economic needs. The discipline of psychology has been instrumental in providing a supposed scientific basis to the dominant educational values of scientific management, efficiency and neoliberalism. This thesis posits that underachievement is a socially located concept which is able to exist and shape social realities due to its convenience to dominant educational and cultural practices. In revealing the social nature of psychological knowledge on underachievement, psychology's claims of the possibility of objective social knowledge under post-positivistic, empirical methods are also brought into question.

Keywords: Underachievement, Foucault, Discourse Analysis, Genealogy, Psychology, Education

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